

AN ASSASSIN'S ANTHEM

Chapter 8 - Early to Die

The sun set, and a heavy fog descended. It crept into windows and doors, blanketing the town in silence. Nervous people tossed and turned as they tried to sleep. Riley rolled over and pulled the fur blanket tighter.

A flame flickered as Roger entered the small room. He looked at the desk, chair, and small bed. Walking forward, he took two steps before stopping.

Riley's eyes snapped open. He spun and looked at the flame, blinking away the sleep. Seeing his father, he squinted and sat up. Then he reached onto the floor and grabbed his woolen, brown attire. Standing up, he quickly got dressed. Then he stood and donned his leather armor, strapping it on.

Roger grabbed the bedspread and rolled it up. It vanished moments later. He walked around the room and stashed the rest of it.

"How close are they?" Riley asked

"Very, but the weather is with us, not them. Use it. They won't be able to see anything in this," Roger said as he handed over weapons.

Riley strapped on his knives, sword, bow, and quiver. "We run if it goes wrong, right?"

"Yes," Roger said, reaching into his pocket. "If anything goes wrong, run. Use your skills to hide, too. We will kill as many as we can before sunrise. Then we will retreat and decide if we aid in defense."

"Will we get two days?" Riley asked as he took the outstretched jerky.

“Unlikely. They moved closer.” Roger gave the small room a final once over. He glanced at the wooden desk and chair. Then he looked at the chest, lifting the lid to ensure nothing was left.

“I got everything... Well, almost everything.” Riley chuckled. “The mayor has a book.”

Roger snorted as he laughed. “You’ve gotten entirely too good at that. If we come back, consider it a final challenge.” He winked.

Alright! Riley grinned and began eating while he walked out of the small thatched cottage. He slapped the door frame on the way and turned down the silent, foggy street.

The fog blocked out almost everything. Faint outlines of things nearby were all that remained. There was just chilly, white and black. Riley looked up and saw the same, white and black swirling together. The outline of a bright, full moon lit the fog. Wish I had a better perception skill. With that thought, he scurried off down the dirt street towards the picket.

“Stay close,” Roger whispered.

“I can’t see very well,” Riley said back.

“I’ll help you. After you get a few ranger levels, it’ll help. And it will help your future skills,” Roger said as they approached the picket.

Riley did his best to pierce the thick haze as he walked down the final alley. Then he triggered his skill, bathing the world in a soft light.

Does this mean that there are shadows everywhere? With nothing else to go on, Riley willed himself to a point beyond the wall, appearing outside.

Roger appeared next to him. The two walked through a harvested field, heading towards the mountains to the north.

The stars above were unable to pierce the fog. The moon lit it with a soft glow, creating a shroud of white as they moved quickly through the forest.

Minutes stretched by as Riley walked carefully through the heavy mist. He focused on the vague outline of his father and followed.

Navigating by vague shapes and feel, Riley made his way through the forest while his father provided guidance. Then he froze as he felt a bump on his shoulder.

Roger gestured in front of his son's face. "Scouts. Kill. Level." He pointed at a tree. "Hunt three months ago. Boar. Remember?"

Riley blinked and rolled his eyes. No, Dad. I do not recognize this foggy place. I can't see anything!

Roger smiled and gestured. Riley nodded and drew his knife. Then he slowly crept forward, sneaking towards the vague outline.

Goblin Scout - Level 10.

He crept up and then finally saw the goblin. It was like a very short human that had somehow turned green and gotten a hog's snout. Riley crept forward and then reached up around its neck.

With a rapid slash, he slit its throat, spraying blood out into the fog. The goblin gurgled and jerked, going still as Riley lowered the short creature to the ground.

+10 XP to base level.

+10 XP to Assassin.

+10 XP to Bard.

+10 XP to Ranger.

Forcing the notifications away until he looked for them, Riley turned towards the next outline. He crept forward and then saw a goblin sleeping next to a tree.

Once again, he silently walked up. Reaching forward with his blade, he drew it across the throat of the goblin, sending a spurt of blood out into the mist.

Roger walked over and tapped on his shoulder. "I go scout. Careful," he signed.

Riley nodded and flashed a sign back. "You near here?"

Roger nodded. He gestured. "Camp. Two hundred meters. Skirt. Kill." Then he vanished, becoming one with the mists.

Embracing a similar mentality, Riley stalked forward, searching for the next outline. It didn't take long to find the level seventeen goblin that was lying on the ground, drooling out into a puddle.

Riley slit its throat and said a silent prayer. "Gods guide them onward. May they be born anew. May they find a better, brighter path as they cycle through."

With a prayer for the fallen spirits that had ended up as goblins, he searched and saw a small camp. The embers lit the fog, making it even harder to see.

Creeping forward, his foot hit something. He reached down and gently felt a log. Stepping over it, he felt his foot sink into soft flesh. The goblin lurched up, coughing.

Surprise blasted through Riley as he stabbed downward, sticking his blade into its skull with a dull thunk. The goblin's mouth opened. Riley grabbed it and forced it shut while it went still.

As relief hit, Riley lowered it and stepped forward, accidentally kicking a rock. The small stone flew through the red mist and thudded against another goblin.

It lurched up and grunted, squinting into the gloom. As panic once more flashed through him, Riley shoved it down and used Ambush. Then he slashed once more, nearly decapitating the goblin.

Lowering the body, Riley moved to the next, cutting its throat before it could wake. Then he repeated it over and over. Blood spilled everywhere as he began rapid executions. In the corner of his eye, he saw his classes hit level two.

Ignoring it, he stalked up to the next goblin, stabbing it in the heart while clamping its mouth shut. As it struggled and bled, he waited and then proceeded to the next with a grim look on his face.

Blood dripped from his hands as he walked. The knife was a vibrant red line in the mist. Embracing the shroud of water that hung in the air, he used it as cover as he stalked up to the next outline.

The goblin scout sniffed, opened its mouth, and then took a knife to its chest. It squealed into its cheeks as Riley held it still.

As it went quiet, Riley lowered it onto the floor and then locked onto the next small camp. Moving like a wraith in the shadows, he began cutting them down once more, sending unseen plumes of red out into the dark fog.

Water mingled with blood as he cut down the defenseless goblins. Doubt began to mingle with it as he did. Is this worth it? Do they deserve it?

He paused to consider it. The gods gave no warning. Will they really destroy the town? Everyone says it, but what if... His thoughts died as he looked at the half-eaten goblin next to another.

Oh, gods! Did it eat its own? Riley checked.

Goblin Butcher - Level 45.

Not wanting any semblance of a fair fight, Riley stashed his knife and pulled out his short sword. Using both hands, he swung with everything he could muster.

The blade severed the spinal cord, sending its head rolling as blood spurted out onto the floor.

+45 XP...

Riley quickly got rid of the text and turned. The level twenty goblin sniffed as it stood up. It chittered. Riley stabbed, sending the shortsword through its throat.

As blood pooled on the blade and up onto his hands, he pulled it free and then forced himself to speed up, burning a bardic inspiration for a boost to his speed.

Turning, he saw an outline on a tree and crept forward. Then he noticed the orange color in the corner of his vision.

Goblin Warrior - Level 123

Panic slammed into him at the same moment as the club, sending him tumbling across the damp ground. The goblin rushed forward while Riley tumbled and coughed up blood.

Sitting up, dread flashed through him. The goblin swung the massive club back.

As panic flashed through him, he used Ambush and slammed his blade against the goblin's chest. The blade vibrated, sending the shockwave up his arms as it struggled to pierce the thick hide.

The goblin spun; its club soaring in an arc. Once again, Riley used Ambush. Then he began creeping forward as pain roared through his ribs, forcing another cough.

Blood dripped down his chin as the goblin charged toward the sound. Hearing the crashing creature, Riley darted for a tree, only taking a few steps before he coughed up another mouthful of blood.

As his vision blurred, he heard the sound of the goblin rushing toward him. The panic pushed his mana to a building fury. He muttered a single word before using Ambush. "Shit."

Appearing behind a tree, Riley slumped against it. The goblin made another ruckus.

Dad, please, Riley thought out to the ether. He tried to force down the cough as the goblin went quiet, lasting two seconds before he coughed up another mouthful.

Roger appeared, knelt, and tipped a potion down his son's throat. Then he glanced around the area and vanished, returning a few seconds later. "Don't move. Wait."

Riley forced himself to swallow the blood and potion. His stomach churned and then calmed. Then he felt pain as his ribs realigned and healed.

Gritting his teeth, he pulled up his notifications to distract himself from the pain.

Skill Unlocked: Psychic Spike (F).

Channel your bardic inspiration or mana into a psychic attack.

Level 123 Goblin Slain! - You gain 369 XP. (246 bonus).

Assassin has reached level 3!

Bard has reached level 3!

Ranger has reached level 3!

Psychic Spike assigned to the only eligible class.

Riley blinked it away as his vision slowly restored. He looked up to see his father standing there. "Sorry," he whispered.

Roger took a seat next to him. "Don't be sorry. That was a massive stretch. I apologize," he whispered. "I'll stay a little closer, but it will hurt your experience if I remove every threat."

"And I can't afford that." Riley looked out at the mist, waving his hand in it. The water clung to him as he did.

Roger patted him on the shoulder. "Ready? I'm hoping that you can hit level twenty before we leave, but that means you are going to need to keep going."

"What made you return to them, Dad?" Riley asked, looking up at him.

"They apologized repeatedly. Then they offered to get you into the academy and offered to help you enter that world. I want you to have a chance for it."

Riley's smile spread wide. "You did it for me?"

"Yes." Roger mussed his hair. "Now, up you get. Be careful."

Riley nodded and forced himself up. Cooling blood trickled down his arms and hands. Wiping it off, he turned back toward the camp. Right. Executions to help a village and to prepare.

Roger poked him and pointed up. Then he signed a message. "Three hours. Quick. I begin." He vanished into the night, targeting higher levels nearby.

Riley prowled forward. Level twenty in three hours. That'll take nearly three hundred goblins. He pulled out his sword and knife. Embracing the chilly mist, he forced his emotions down and began his slaughter once more.